

Journey Through the Middle East

Daily Blog: November 28, 2005 – December 2, 2005

Iraq – December 2, 2005 – 11:45pm :

Our Air Force C-130 took off from Kuwait air base at 7:30am, climbed to altitude and headed for Iraq. Off of our right wing you could see Iran in the distance. The C-130 cargo aircraft is a durable workhorse of both the Air Force and Air Guard units around the country, including the Delaware Air National Guard. This particular model is 42 years old, making it older than any of the seven crewmembers aboard.

Our flight engineer on this flight was 12-year veteran Sonya Hawkins, a staff sergeant from Kentucky. Her unit is home-based near Fayetteville, N.C. where her seven-year-old son lives with family friends while his mom is away for a four-month deployment. Sonya talks with him by phone several times a week and communicates with him by email a couple of times each day. Her husband works for the FBI out of an office near D.C. and gets to be with their son several weekends each month. Sonya holds a B.S. in Aeronautical Engineering that she earned while on active duty. Lt. Rod Jones is the crew's navigator. He's from Ohio. His wife and their three daughters live near Fayetteville, like Sonya. He talks with them by phone several times each week and by email almost daily. The favorite part of his job, he says, is carrying planeloads of servicemen and women out of Iraq as they head for home. "They really whoop it up in the back of the plane," he says. The young flight members are an impressive team. They demonstrate a lot of enthusiasm for their work and for flying together. Their professionalism belies their age.

Our descent into Baghdad was unlike any descent that you'll ever make in a civilian airliner. We donned our flak jackets and helmets as we approached the airport at altitude and then began a steep descent almost directly over Baghdad International. Lt. Jones and the aircraft's load master stood ready to discharge flares immediately from the aircraft if heat-seeking missiles were fired at us during the descent. The flares trick the missiles into pursuing them instead of the aircraft, but flares are of no help against anti-aircraft artillery, small arms fire, or AK-47 fire. The descent and landing proved to be exhilarating but, fortunately, uneventful. "We cheated death again," I said to the crew as I shook their hands and thanked them for the ride and for their service to our country.

We exited the aircraft still wearing our flak jackets and helmets, climbed into our waiting vehicles and drove directly to a nearby palace that Saddam Hussein had built for his mother. Just inside the entrance, I was greeted by twenty or so members of the Delaware National Guard who had been brought together to say hello to their old commander-in-chief and (former governor). They were from all over Delaware, including Seaford, Bridgeville, Milton, Milford, Claymont, and

Newark. It was great to see them. I spoke with each one and shook every hand. We took a lot of individual photos and then a group shot before an aide to General George Casey, our American military commander in Iraq, hustled me off to start our scheduled meeting with the general.

Thus began a series of intense discussions that lasted throughout the day and into the evening in the Baghdad area with the leaders of America's military forces, as well as with our U.S. Ambassador and his senior staff, Iraq's Prime Minister, other Iraqi civilian leaders and General Babakir, Chief of Staff of the Iraqi armed forces. Virtually all of them stayed "on message," but the message was not the one I expected. Almost to a person, they predicted that turnout in Iraq's upcoming December 15th parliamentary elections would be strong and that no group or party would emerge with the majority of the 275 seats up for grabs. Each of them acknowledged that putting together a coalition government after the elections might be tough, but it would have to be done. Both U.S. and Iraqi military and civilian leaders with whom we met also called for beginning significant American troop redeployments from Iraq next year and for continuing those redeployments through 2007 as the combat readiness of Iraqi troops improves.

I agree with them. There are plenty of people in Iraq who view our troops as occupiers, not liberators. They believe we are intent on remaining in Iraq indefinitely in large numbers to ensure U.S. access to Iraqi oil. We need to start making clear that this is not the case and begin doing so as early as next month. Otherwise, I fear that our troops, like the 10 Marines killed today in a horrific attack near Fallujah, will continue to remain targets of opportunity unnecessarily for months or even years to come.

Early on Saturday morning, I'll climb on another airplane in Amman, Jordan and begin to wind my way back home to Delaware. God willing, I'll be home with my family by Saturday night. Along the way, I plan to read through copious notes that I've taken over the past five days, as we've sojourned through five countries in this part of the world. I want to reflect on what we've heard and learned. This coming Monday, I'll share with Delawareans the conclusions I've reached and will then recommend a path forward, based on those conclusions, to my Senate colleagues and to the Bush Administration later this month when the Senate reconvenes. Once I've done so, I would welcome your comments and thoughts in return.

Saudi Arabia & Kuwait – December 1, 2005 – 9:45pm :

We rolled out of our hotel around 7:30am and piled into the vehicles waiting outside. Led by a Saudi police car with lights flashing and sirens wailing, we charged out onto the road and into Riyadh's rush hour traffic in a country where terrorist attacks still occur. The sea of cars, trucks, and vans parted in front of us allowing our six-vehicle convoy to pass through at speeds approaching 80 mph. For a moment I thought, "I wonder if this is how Moses felt leading the children of Israel through the Red Sea with the Egyptians in hot pursuit?" When a car failed to get out of our way quickly, our driver would honk his horn and jam on his brakes or swerve to avoid a collision. One near miss began to follow another. I tugged on my shoulder harness and seat belt to make sure they were secure and motioned to my colleague to do the same. Then, without warning, our driver slammed on the brakes to avoid running into a car that pulled out in front of us. The vehicle behind us tried to stop but couldn't quite pull it off and plowed into us. Rather than stopping to survey the damage, we just resumed speed and continued on. Our Saudi driver looked at the two of us through the rear view mirror. "You okay," he asked? "My neck! My neck!," I moaned, but when we hopped out of our car a few minutes later, I gave him a big thumbs up and said, "Thanks for a ride I'll not soon forget." And I won't.

If I was sleepy when we left the hotel, I was wide awake by the time we walked into our breakfast meeting with the Saudi-American Chamber of Commerce. Twenty-five businessmen and spouses were awaiting us, including representatives of companies like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Price-Waterhouse, AstraZeneca, and Exxon Mobil. I asked for a show of hands of all who were incorporated in Delaware. Almost every hand went up. When we asked them later to share their concerns with us, they focused on these three:

- The importance of improving U.S.-Saudi relations;
- The need to expedite the processing of visas which now take many months to process, creating enormous backlogs;
- The loss of military sales to Saudis by U.S. defense contractors to other countries who have no inhibitions about providing the Saudis with the very latest weapons technology.

Following breakfast, we headed for the U.S. Embassy, a large fortress-like structure. There, some of our delegation received intelligence updates before joining the U.S. Ambassador and his senior team for an in-depth briefing on a wide range of subjects. Among them were the concerns raised at the Chamber breakfast as well as the possibility of Iran sparking a nuclear arms race with the Saudis if Iran proceeds with its nuclear program. It was a sobering conversation.

When it ended, we went to a working lunch with Embassy staff and several very impressive Saudis from the oil ministry. One of them is a member of the royal family, and a Prince to boot, as well as the Saudi's deputy oil minister. He explained how the oil industry has changed dramatically over the past two decades and is now run largely by Saudis, not expatriates. Vertically integrated operations cover everything from exploratory activities, drilling, oil and gas recovery and refining operations to producing products for export and to provide feed stocks to a growing petro-chemical industry there that enables the Saudis to eat our industry's lunch with natural gas prices barely one-quarter of our own.

After a one-hour flight following lunch, we touched down in Kuwait City and headed for an abbreviated country team briefing by U.S. personnel. Kuwaitis remember how the U.S. led a broad coalition of countries in the early 1990's to drive Saddam Hussein's brutal army out of Kuwait. They continue to show their gratitude to this day in extraordinary ways. For example, on the heels of Hurricane Katrina, Kuwaitis provided over \$500 million of relief assistance to victims, almost as much as the rest of the world combined. In addition, the Kuwaitis have supported the removal of Saddam Hussein from the outset. The country provided for virtually all of the fuel needs of coalition forces in 2003-4 at no charge and deeply discounts fuel costs today. Moreover, Kuwait is hosting within its border over 20,000 members of coalition forces from across the globe – FOR FREE! Kuwait also allows the great majority of material, equipment, weapons and personnel for the war effort to come through its airports and seaports en route to Iraq. Roughly 1,000 trucks cross the border into Iraq each day from Kuwait.

Kuwait isn't about to go broke, though, despite all of its generosity. They've still got enough oil money left over to provide for its 1 million citizens' free health care, free education, heavily subsidized utilities, deeply discounted homes to buy, and generous retirement benefits, including the ability of women to retire after working for just 15 years. Roughly 90 percent of Kuwaitis work in the public sector or in their oil industry. American taxpayers who sometimes wonder if we get a day's work for a day's pay from all of our public servants might take some comfort in the words of the Kuwaiti Prime Minister who said of his public sector workforce last summer that Kuwait would be better served if 90 percent of them would just stay home every day and collect their paychecks! And, no they don't have telecommuting in Kuwait yet.

The day ended on an upbeat note, though, as I went for a long run at dusk through Kuwait City with one of the terrific U.S. Marines who is accompanying our delegation on this mission. He wasn't along for protection either, because today we were in a country where citizens wave at Americans and greet them, not take pot shots at or attempt to kidnap them.

Jordan & Saudi Arabia – November 30, 2005 – 11:30 pm:

We grabbed a little breakfast at our hotel in Amman, Jordan, first thing this morning, headed for the airport, climbed on our military aircraft and took off for Riyadh, the capitol of Saudi Arabia. Two hours later, we were on the ground there shaking hands with the U.S. Ambassador at the bottom of our plane's ladder. A "control officer" from the American embassy, who was assigned to work with our delegation walked us to an awaiting vehicle. The officer introduced himself in part by saying that his wife grew up in Delaware and in nearby Pennsville, New Jersey. His sister-in-law Lynn Davison still lives in Delaware. "Small world," I said. As the American-made vehicle we climbed into roared out of the airport and onto a four-lane highway, we immediately passed a shiny blue Dodge Durango made in Newark, Delaware. I started to feel at home even though our visit to Saudi Arabia was the first by a Congressional delegation in two years.

Saudi Arabia sits on roughly a quarter of the world's known oil reserves. With oil prices still hovering around \$55 a barrel, Saudi Arabia is awash in cash. Every direction we looked suggested that the Saudis weren't reluctant to spend it either. Late-model cars from all over the world filled the highways. Breathtaking architectural structures reached from what used to be the desert floor up to the sky. And, where once there was only sand, trees, shrubs, flowers and grass now grow. In a kingdom where the population was overwhelmingly nomadic, barely 75 years ago, today almost 95 percent of the people live in urban centers like Riyadh.

Our afternoon in Riyadh was spent meeting with what could have been called by the late King Fahd "My Three Sons." One is King Abdullah, another is Crown Prince Sultan who also serves as Defense Minister, and the third is Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. All are in their late 70s or early 80s. Two of them, the Crown Prince and the King, looked like they could have been sent right from central casting. On the other hand, their Foreign Minister brother, looked and sounded like he could've graduated from Princeton. And in fact, he did a number of years ago. Together, the three of them and their family have provided and will likely continue to provide leadership for the kingdom of Saudi Arabia for years to come. While we met separately with them in opulent palaces, and I doubt that they had rehearsed their comments before hand, they certainly were remarkably on message. Each offered comments that were consistent with the others. On the need for the U.S. and Saudis to set aside their differences since 9/11 and begin to cooperate together again, King Abdullah said, "In Iraq, what is done is done. We share many common concerns. We need to begin working together again."

All three declared that an Iraq which disintegrates is intolerable and unimaginable. They acknowledged that their country has an obligation to lead

other nations in the region to help stabilize the new government emerging in Iraq while containing the growth of Iranian influence in the region.

King Abdullah told us of an unprecedented, surprise visit two days earlier by the personal emissary of Iran's Supreme Leader. And while the King did not divulge the full content of their conversation he did say to us, that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia share the same enemy with respect to Iraq. And he added, "I think you know who that is." As the meeting concluded and we walked away, I couldn't help but wonder if he was talking about Iran or simply about terrorism in general. Several hours later, I've concluded that he was alluding to Iran, and I am reminded of the old adage – "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

We wrapped up our day at the residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and his wife. Their home is stunning! As they gave us the cook's tour, I suggested to them their residence gives new meaning to the term public housing, and they agreed. We were joined for an outdoor reception and dinner around the pool by several dozen prominent Saudi leaders from business, government, and academia. Over dinner at my table, two women – one a dean of a local university in her 50s and the second a successful young businesswoman half her age – spoke with us about a growing tolerance in their country toward women and the opportunities afforded them. Both women told us that they believed next year's round of municipal elections would witness a first – female candidates. Not only are attitudes towards women evolving here they said, slowly but surely democracy is beginning to take root, as well. And, its introduction will benefit both Saudi females and males.

Israel & Jordan - November 29, 2005 – 11:45 pm:

The second day of our trip, we woke up to a sunny 70 degrees in the original land of milk and honey.

Before the morning would end, our delegation would meet with the Foreign Affairs Advisor to the dynamic new leader of the Israeli Labor Party and be briefed by a senior Israeli intelligence officer before heading for Ramallah in a bullet proof SUV. There, we would meet with Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei before sitting down with the leadership of the Palestinian-American Chamber of Commerce to talk about what all Chambers of Commerce are interested in – jobs.

Qurei was a chief negotiator of the Oslo Accords and worked closely with the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the 1990s. Despite the title he holds today, Qurei has little power in the current Palestinian government. Meeting with us, he reflected back on those early negotiations and recalled these words of Rabin, "We will fight terror as if there was no peace process; We will pursue peace as if there was no terror." A decade after Rabin's assassination those words still ring true in the Middle East that struggles to reach a lasting peace.

Leaving Prime Minister Qurei, we headed across the street to a meeting with Palestinian business leaders, who had two main requests. First that the U.S. stay involved in peace negotiations, and second, that the U.S. continue to support the creation of jobs for Palestinians, whose unemployment rate exceeds 40 percent.

From Ramallah, it was on to meet the King of Jordan.

Our flight from Tel Aviv to Amman, Jordan, took less than 30 minutes and carried us over some of the driest land on earth. Arid or not, though, Jordan is playing a key role on many fronts these days – in the war against terrorism, in supporting the peace process in Israel, and in building a more stable Iraq. Jordan also turns out to be "training central" for all kinds of activities, too:

- 25,000 Iraqi police recruits trained to date and another 10,000 in the pipeline;
- 600 Iraqi counter-terrorism commandos trained; and,
- 1,200 Iraqi border guards and customs officials trained, as well.

That's not all either. Jordanians even train guard dog handlers, air traffic controllers, and airplane mechanics. And, in a new twist on "training the trainer," Jordanians have also trained 800 Americans to go home and work with American units preparing to deploy to Iraq. Why? To sensitize the U.S. troops to Iraqi customs and culture. There's one thing, though, that Jordan doesn't train. That's Iraqi military officers. They were expected to. The U.S. even invested \$50 million

to build a training center outside of Amman for just that purpose, but the government of Iraq put the kibosh on it. Today the center sits empty and unused.

Jordan is led by King Abdullah, son of the late King Hussein. We met with him for over an hour this afternoon at his residence. Nice digs. This King is one impressive monarch. Educated in England and in the U.S., he speaks with just a touch of a British accent and is knowledgeable on a broad range of subjects. Once the commander of Jordan's Special Forces, King Abdullah isn't afraid to do what he thinks is right either, even if it doesn't always comport with public opinion in his country. He's married to a beautiful woman, Queen Rania, who recently gave birth to their fourth child.

King Abdullah's got a sense of humor, too. I kidded him as we were leaving and asked him if his children had ever seen the Disney film "The Lion King." He laughed and said that they had. I reminded him of one of the songs from the film, "It's Great To Be King," and asked him if it really is all that great to be king. "Being king in this part of the world is a lot of work," he said. "If the country you were king of was wedged between Norway and Sweden, I bet it would be a lot easier." He smiled when he said it, but he wasn't kidding. Jordan is bordered by Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq. As we drove away from the palace, I thought about how fortunate our country is that he's holding down the job in Jordan. Let's hope he holds on to it for a long time.

Jerusalem - November 28, 2005 - Midnight:

After several weeks of preparation, the hour of our congressional delegation's departure for the Middle East had come. It was 6pm on Sunday evening. Minutes later, Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-NE), U.S. Representative Ellen Tauscher (D-CA) and I were airborne, heading for Munich, Germany aboard a United airliner on the first leg of our fact-finding mission. Eight hours – and two briefing books later – we touched down in Munich. There, we quickly transferred over to a U.S. military aircraft assigned to us and took off for the last four hours of our journey today. When we landed the second time, we were in Israel, the first stop of a mission that would also take us to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq before heading home next weekend.

Two hours after landing at Tel Aviv, we were being briefed in Jerusalem by U.S. embassy senior staff and by the U.S. Consul General Jake Wallis who, incidentally, grew up two blocks from my family's home in Wilmington, Delaware. As soon as the briefing was over, we jumped into a Suburban with our security detail and headed across town to the Prime Minister's office for an hour-long meeting with Ariel Sharon. I had been at the nearby Knesset just eight months earlier when Sharon took on his own Likud party to push for, and win, approval of a controversial plan to pull Israeli settlers and forces unilaterally out of the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. I had returned to the U.S. in late March more convinced than ever that one of the best ways to battle global terrorism is for the U.S. to put as much energy into brokering a negotiated settlement in the Middle East that provides the Palestinians with a homeland of their own and the Israelis with peace and secure borders. I phoned Secretary of State Rice in early April and then met with her in DC earlier this month to encourage her to do all that she could to jumpstart both the peace process and the Palestinian economy. How? By negotiating an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians that allows greater freedom of movement of Palestinians and their goods in and out of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. To her credit, Rice did just that two weeks ago in Jerusalem in a major breakthrough signed by both Sharon and Palestinian President Abbas.

Likud Party hardliners, already angered by Sharon's unilateral disengagement from Gaza and the West Bank were further inflamed by this latest concession agreed to by their party's cofounder. Sharon, rather than trying to calm down his angry Likud colleagues announced this past weekend that he was abandoning the party he helped to create over three decades ago. Instead, Prime Minister Sharon today founded a brand new centrist party simply called "Forward," through which he will seek to build a grand coalition to govern Israel as it seeks to move toward a permanent peace settlement.

If that wasn't enough excitement for one day, back at our hotel later tonight, we met with Dr. Salam Fayyad, finance minister for the Palestinian Authority who will be retiring from this post later this week. He shared with us that earlier today

when Palestinians throughout Gaza and the West Bank tried to vote in the Palestinian primary, voting was disrupted in many places by Palestinian gunmen firing weapons, effectively putting those elections on hold.

It's never dull in Israel or in the Middle East, and today was no exception. The characters are extraordinary and bigger than life, too. Here's Ariel Sharon, I thought as our meeting with him began earlier today. Now, 78 years old, Sharon once again stands poised to lead his country. At the age of 14, he was a company commander during the 1930's in Israel's war of independence. At the age of 26, he led all of Israel's commandos. In the years since, he became Israel's top general and led his country to victories in several Israeli-Arab wars before co-founding the Likud Party and going on to become his country's prime minister. He is widely expected to be successful in establishing a new centrist party and in brokering a final settlement with the Palestinians. He just might succeed too, working with Palestinian leaders like President Abbas and Dr. Salam Fayyad.

At the end of our meeting with Sharon, I stayed behind for a minute to ask him one final question. That question was, "To what do you attribute the remarkable success and staying power in this political cauldron called Israel?" He thought for a moment, smiled, and simply said, "I don't give up." And I thought as we left, neither should we.